DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 208 776 CS 206 460

AUTHOR Acharya, Lalit
TITLE Effect of Perceived Environmental Uncertainty on Public Relations Roles.
SPONS AGENCY Wisconsin Univ., Madison. Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education.; Wisconsin Univ., Madison. Graduate School.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (64th, East Lansing, MI, August 8-11, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; Decision Making; Measurement Techniques; Measures (Individuals); *Occupational Surveys; Organizational Communication; *Public Relations; Role Models; *Role Perception; *Work Attitudes; *Work Environment

ABSTRACT

A study investigated perceived uncertainty in organizational environment as a predictor of four perceived role models in public relations professionals (expert prescriber, technical services provider, communication process facilitator, and problem solving process facilitator). Two 16-item scales measured the simple-complex and static-dynamic dimensions of the public relations decision making environment, while a 28-item instrument was devised to measure the role variables. When 229 members of the Public Relations Society of America were surveyed with these instruments, the findings showed that perceptions of simple-static environments were associated with technical services provider roles, and that complex-dynamic environments were associated with problem solving process facilitator roles. Expert-prescriber role predominated the simple-static and complex-dynamic environments. Environmental uncertainty had no effect for the communication process facilitator role. (Author/RL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED204776

EFFECT OF PERCEIVED ENVIRONMENTAL UNCERTAINTY ON PUBLIC RELATIONS ROLES

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Lalit Acharya
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

By

Lalit Acharya
Mass Communication Research Center
University of Wisconsin
Madison, Wisconsin 53706
(608) 263 3381

(This research supported by grants to Glen M. Broom, Assoc. Professor, San Diego State University, from the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education and the University of Wisconsin-Madison Graduate School.)

Presented to the Public Relations Division, Association for Education in Journalism Annual Convention, East Lansing, MI, August 9, 1981.

CS206460

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,...

William Shakespeare
As You Like It
Act 11, Sc. V11

What roles do public relations practitioners play in their professional lives? Why, and under what conditions are the role behaviors assumed and exhibited? Broom and Smith (1979) provide five conceptually distinct role models without explaining why they occur. The role models, drawn largely from consulting literature, are:

Expert prescriber. In this role, the practitioner takes major responsibility for researching and defining the PR problem, and prescribing solutions (Newsom and Scott, 1976). It is often referred to as a 'doctor-patient' model because of its similarity to a doctor's diagnostic and prescriptive approach to patients' medical problems;

Technical services provider. Here, the practitioner provides skills such as writing, graphics, photography, etc. to help execute a public relations program. There is no attempt to either define or solve PR problems;

Communication process facilitator. Such role behavior helps maintain continuous two-way communication between an organization and its publics. A practitioner in this role is variously called spokesperson, information mediator, interpreter and communication link (Newsom and Scott, 1976);

Acceptant legitimizer, a non-directive, 'yes-man' role behavior based on sympathetic listening and emphathetic support (Blake and Mouton, 1976);

> Problem-solving process facilitator. This role represents a collaborative relationship in which the practitioner helps line units within an organization apply a systematic problem-solving process. Unlike in the expert role, the emphasis here is on helping the line units determine and define their own problems and arrive at their solutions to these problems (Cutlip and Center, 1971).

Broom and Smith (1979) assume that while each role represents a distinct behavioral pattern, practitioners can adopt varying degrees of all five roles. They further assume that the practitioner develops a dominant style of job-related behavior through preference and training, and in response to others' expectations and situational constraints. However, in seeking to ascertain the presence of the role models, they leave open to further inquiry the question of causation of practitioner roles.

This paper investigates perceived uncertainty in organizational environment as a predictor of four of the role models. The acceptant legitimizer role is excluded because it neither provides communication skills for the organization nor does it act as an intervention between the organization and its environment.

ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Contingency or open systems theorists stress the importance of the environment in determining organizational structure and activity. Often, the stimulus for change is presumed to come from the environment the organization operates in, and dictates response and behavior within it.

Much of the contingency research fails to clearly conceptualize organizational environment or the elements that comprise it.

Some (Pugh, Hickson, Hinings and Turner, 1969) have studied organizational settings such as origin, history, size and location, but admit this is not a model of an organization in an environment. Others (Dill, 1958; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967) limit the concept to an organization's external environment. Duncan (1972), with whom this paper concurs, conceives it as all the physical and social factors that an individual in an organization takes into consideration in decision-making behavior. Factors falling within the organization's structural boundaries constitute internal environment, while factors outside form the external environment. Decision-making is broadly defined as the gathering and processing of information that precedes and determines the behavioral response of individuals or units in the organization.

Two perspectives are visible in the theorizing on organization-environment relationships. One is the resource-dependence perspective (Emerson, 1962; Aiken and Hage, 1968), which argues that an organization's environment is a function of resource levels and availability. The other, and one pertinent to this paper, is the information perspective (Dill, 1958; Weick, 1969; Duncan, 1972), which holds the environment to be a source of information that is widely used by decision-makers for maintaining or modifying organizational structures, processes and behaviors.

Gate-keeping the flow of information between organization and environment are several boundary-spanning mechanisms, one of which is public relations. Public relations is intended to continuously

read the organization's environment, be an early warning system to help anticipate trends, help management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, keep management informed of and be responsive to public opinion, and serve as a communication link between organization and its publics (Harlow, 1976). Thus, in the public relations practitioner's decision-making environment, there are physical factors such as commercial and economic trends, and social factors such as the publics they help the organization interact with.

A critical point to note in the information perspective is that perception of information is assumed to be an intervening link between the environment and any resultant behavioral response. This assumption has important implications, for uncertainty may not only be the product of the unpredictability of environmental elements, but a function of individual perceptions.

UNCERTAINTY

While contingency theorists have examined environmental variables such as situational favorability, technological complexity and environmental volatility, the key research focus seems to be on environmental uncertainty (Aldag and Storey, 1975). Organizations are perceived to interact with their environments to cope with uncertainty, a lack of certain knowledge of future contingencies (Rogers and Rogers, 1976).

Uncertainty has been variously defined. Information theorists like Garner (1962) define it as the logarithm of the number of

possible outcomes an event can have. Michael (1973) says that uncertainty is a psychological state caused not only by loss of control of the situation, but also of one's self. Downey and Slocum (1975) refer to it as the state that exists when an individual finds himself engaging in behavior based on less than complete knowledge of his existing relationship with the environment, or his self-environment relationship within a time frame in the future. Rogers and Rogers (1976) define uncertainty as the number of alternatives with respect to the occurrence of an event, together with the relative probabilities of these alternatives. Uncertainty, therefore, implies lack of order, of stability and predictability.

Kofka (1935) suggests that uncertainty is best studied with reference to the behavioral environment (the environment as perceived and reacted to by individuals) rather than by reference to the physical or objective environment. Zaltman, Duncan and Holbeck (1975) state that factors influencing individual perceptions directly or indirectly influence organizational perceptions. Downey and Slocum (1975) imply that organizational perceptions are representative of a totality of individual perceptions. They state that given reality is infinite in terms of its elements, an individual's mapping of the environment must be less than complete, and thus accounts for uncertainty. Miles, Snow and Pfeffer (1974) find that within the same objective environment, there are managers who perceive little uncertainty, and managers who perceive continuous change and uncertainty. This fits in with the work of Galbraith (1973) and Weick's (1969) notion of <u>enacted environment</u>, both of

which suggest that organizational response may well be consistent with perceptions of the environment than with objective indicators of environmental conditions. Hence, uncertainty is looked at in terms of perceptions of the environment, or perceived environmental uncertainty.

Organizational theorists like Emery and Trist (1965), Thompson (1967), Terreberry (1968) and Duncan (1972) have ordered the environment along two dimensions, namely simple-complex and static-dynamic. The simple-complex dimension is defined in terms of the number of factors entering the decision-making process. The more the factors, the more complex the environment. The static-dynamic dimension is defined as the degree to which these factors are perceived to be stable over a period of time, or in a constant state of change. When crossed, the two dimensions yield four organizational environments. These are simple-static environment, where factors considered relevant for and important to decision-making are relatively few and stable; simple-dynamic environment, where the factors are few, but perceived to be in a constant state of change; complex-static environment, where the factors are many, but stable; and complex-dynamic environment, where the factors are perceived to be both many and in a state of flux.

Duncan (1972) empirically shows organizations with simple-static environments to experience the least amount of uncertainty. Organizations with complex-dynamic environments experience the greatest amounts of uncertainty. The other two are intermediate

environments, with simple-dynamic environments causing greater uncertainty than complex-static environments. Duncan concludes that the static-dynamic dimension is a more important contributor to perceptions of uncertainty than is the simple-complex dimension.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Burns and Stalker (1961), operating under the structural contingency assumption of environmental adaptation, posit two types of organizations. One is the mechanistic organization, which is capable of generating largely routine and repetitive behavior. Such an organization is appropriate for and is a response to stable environments. The other is the organic type of organization, which is flexible, growing, developing and adapting to the environment in the manner of a living organism. The organic organization is appropriate for dynamic environments. When placed in conjunction with the Katz and Kahn (1978) assumption that organizations are a system of roles and consist of individual acts and behaviors rather than unchanging physical components, it follows that mechanistic role behaviors are suited to stable environments, and organic role behaviors to dynamic environments.

Mechanistic and organic behaviors are analogous to Spiro's (1958) notions of substantive power and procedural power, which Smith (1978) applies to the public relations role models described earlier in the paper. Smith classifies the expert and technician role models as substantive power behaviors, since they are based

on qualities or attributes possessed by the role enactor. These qualities, such as expert knowledge and specialized skills are inherent or learned and stable over time. The communicator and problem-solver role models are categorized as process-oriented behaviors based on procedural power. Schein (1967) describes process consultation as a set of activities on the part of the consultant designed to help a client perceive, understand and act upon process events which occur in the client's environment. Being process behaviors, they are dependent upon situational and informational contingencies and are appropriate to change-laden environments.

In corollary, it can be stated that stable environments are associated with substantive role behaviors such as expert prescriber and technical services provider, while dynamic environments are associated with process roles such as communication process facilitator and problem-solving process facilitator.

In the technical services provider role, the practitioner applies his journalism and technical skills such as graphics, writing and photography, to name a few, to help execute a public relations program. He neither diagnoses public relations problems nor specifies solutions, these being the domain of others (client/boss) in the organization. One of the major variables affecting the success of this role is the adequacy of the other's problem definition and selected solution (Broom and Smith, 1979). Since many of the decisions are already made for the practitioner, his

decision-making environment is limited to relatively few (simple), enduring (stable) task-oriented technical considerations. As such, it may be said that technical services provider role behavior is governed by a simple-static environment.

> H_1 - Public relations practitioners who perceive their environment to be simple-static (or the environment of least perceived uncertainty) are most likely to exhibit a dominant technical services provider role behavior.

In contrast, the expert prescriber is an authority, the person with all the answers (Cutlip and Center, 1971), who relies on skills acquired from a body of knowledge or past experience (Blake and Mouton, 1976). The expert systematically applies past solutions to current problems, and, in the process, ignores the client's own knowledge of the situation (Broom and Smith, 1979). It is evident that the success of this role hinges upon recurring, and therefore predictable types of situations. However, since the expert assumes responsibility for spelling out public relations problems and their solutions, factors relevant to his decision-making process increase. His environment can no longer be described as simple.

> H_2 - Public relations practitioners who perceive their environment to be complex-static are most likely to exhibit a dominant expert prescriber role behavior.

The communication process facilitator is an information mediator, who is both an important source of information about an organization and its official channel to constituent publics (Cutlip and Center, 1971). The practitioner in this role is thus operating in

dynamic, information-processing situation, which, nonetheless may be simple because the practitioner is facilitating communication between the organization and one or few publics at a given time.

H_3 - Public relations practitioners who perceive their environment to be simple-dynamic are most likely to exhibit a dominant communication process facilitator role behavior.

The problem-solving process facilitator functions in an equally dynamic, process-oriented situation. Since his role involves joint diagnosis and the generation of a remedy for a specific problem with others in the organization, the number of factors he has to take into consideration in his decision-making process increase. Hence, the problem-solver's environment can best be described as a complex-dynamic environment.

H_4 - Public relations practitioners who perceive their environment to be complex-dynamic (or the environment of greatest perceived uncertainty) are most likely to exhibit a dominant problem-solving process facilitator role behavior.

METHOD AND MEASUREMENT

In a national survey of public relations practitioners, questionnaires were mailed to 815 randomly selected members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Four hundred and fifty eight (56%) usable questionnaires were returned. The PR role variables were carried on all of the questionnaires, while the predictor uncertainty variables were carried on only half so as to accommodate other predictor variables. Thus, the number of returned and usable questionnaires that carried both the uncertainty and role variables was 229 (56%).

Perceived Environmental Uncertainty: Sixteen items relevant to a public relations practitioner's decision-making environment were distilled from PR texts to create an index for the simple-complex dimension. The items comprised, to name a few, internal publics such as managers, staff and union officials; external publics such as government and consumers; and commercial intelligence factors like market position and share, and economic trends. The items were measured on a five point scale of (1) never important, (2) seldom important, (3) sometimes important, (4) often important, and (5) always important.

The same sixteen items were arranged on a five point scale of (1) never changes, (2) seldom changes, (3) sometimes changes, (4) often changes, and (5) always changes, to create an index for the static-dynamic dimension.

Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for the two indices: simple-complex dimension, 0.73; static-dynamic dimension, 0.78.

Respondent mean scores on the two uncertainty indices approximated the normal distribution curve. Therefore, the median mean score was used to split the simple-complex dimension, mean scores below the median falling into the simple category, mean scores above into the complex category. Similarly, a median split was used to separate the static-dynamic dimension into static and dynamic components. The four components were used to type four organizational environments, namely simple-static, simple-dynamic, complex-static and complex dynamic.

Public relations roles: Twenty eight items on a seven point scale of (1) never to (7) always were used to measure the role variables, there being seven items to each role. The items, to name a few:

Expert prescriber: "I diagnose public relations problems and explain them to others in the organization."

Technical services provider: "I handle the technical aspects of producing public relations materials."

Communication process facilitator: "I keep management informed of public reaction to organizational policies, procedures and/or actions."

Problem-solving process facilitator: "I keep management involved in every phase of the public relations program."

Reliability coefficients for each role index: expert prescriber, 0.92; technical services provider, 0.84; communication process facilitator, 0.79; and problem-solving process facilitator, 0.90.

The highest mean score among the role indices was used to determine practitioners' dominant roles.

Measurement models: The statistical model used to ascertain if the distribution of roles in the four environmental conditions follows as predicted by the hypotheses was a chi-square test of homogeneity. To test for differences in proportions of roles in each environmental condition, ninety five percent confidence intervals were constructed around the formula $\hat{\Psi} - \sqrt{\chi^2 \mathrm{Var}(\hat{\Psi})} < \Psi < \hat{\Psi} + \sqrt{\chi^2 \mathrm{Var}(\hat{\Psi})}$. An interaction analysis of variance model was also used to test the predictive power of the uncertainty variables.

The criterion for statistical significance was an alpha of 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$).

Figure 1. Distribution of Technical Services Provider Role in Four Perceived Environmental Uncertainty Conditions

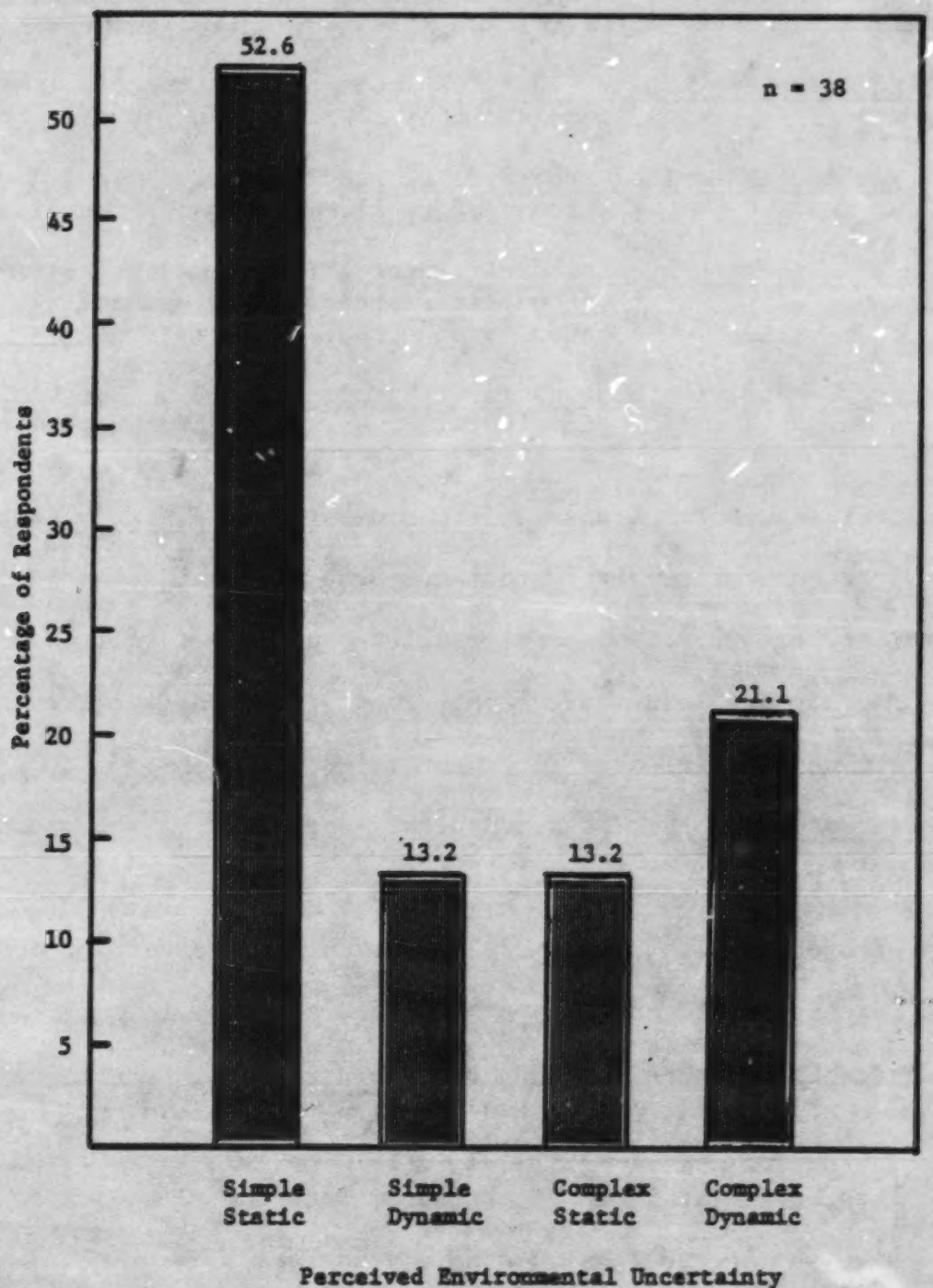


Figure 2. Distribution of Problem-Solving Process Facilitator Role in Four Perceived Environmental Uncertainty Conditions

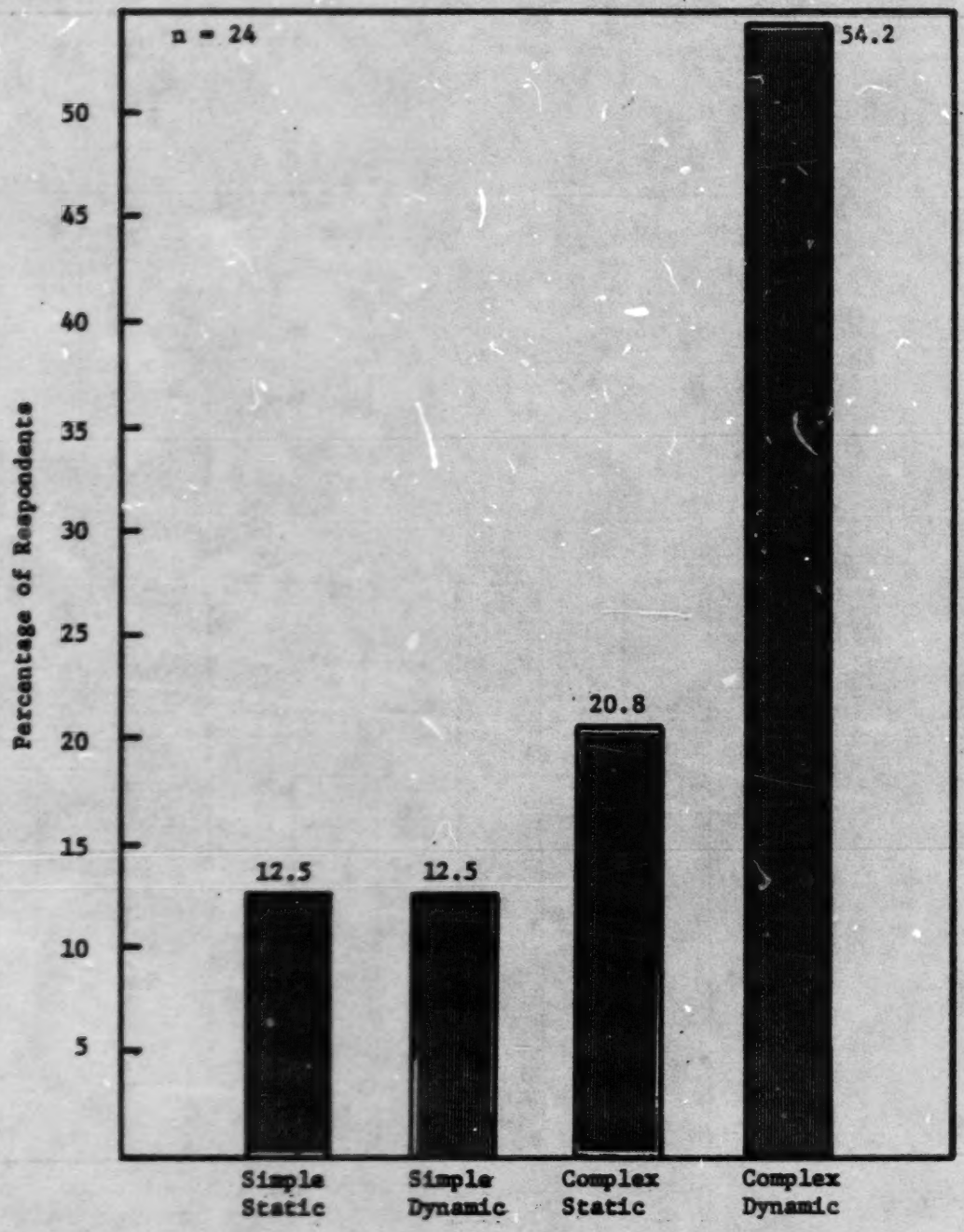


Figure 3. Distribution of Communication Process Facilitator Role in Four Perceived Environmental Uncertainty Conditions

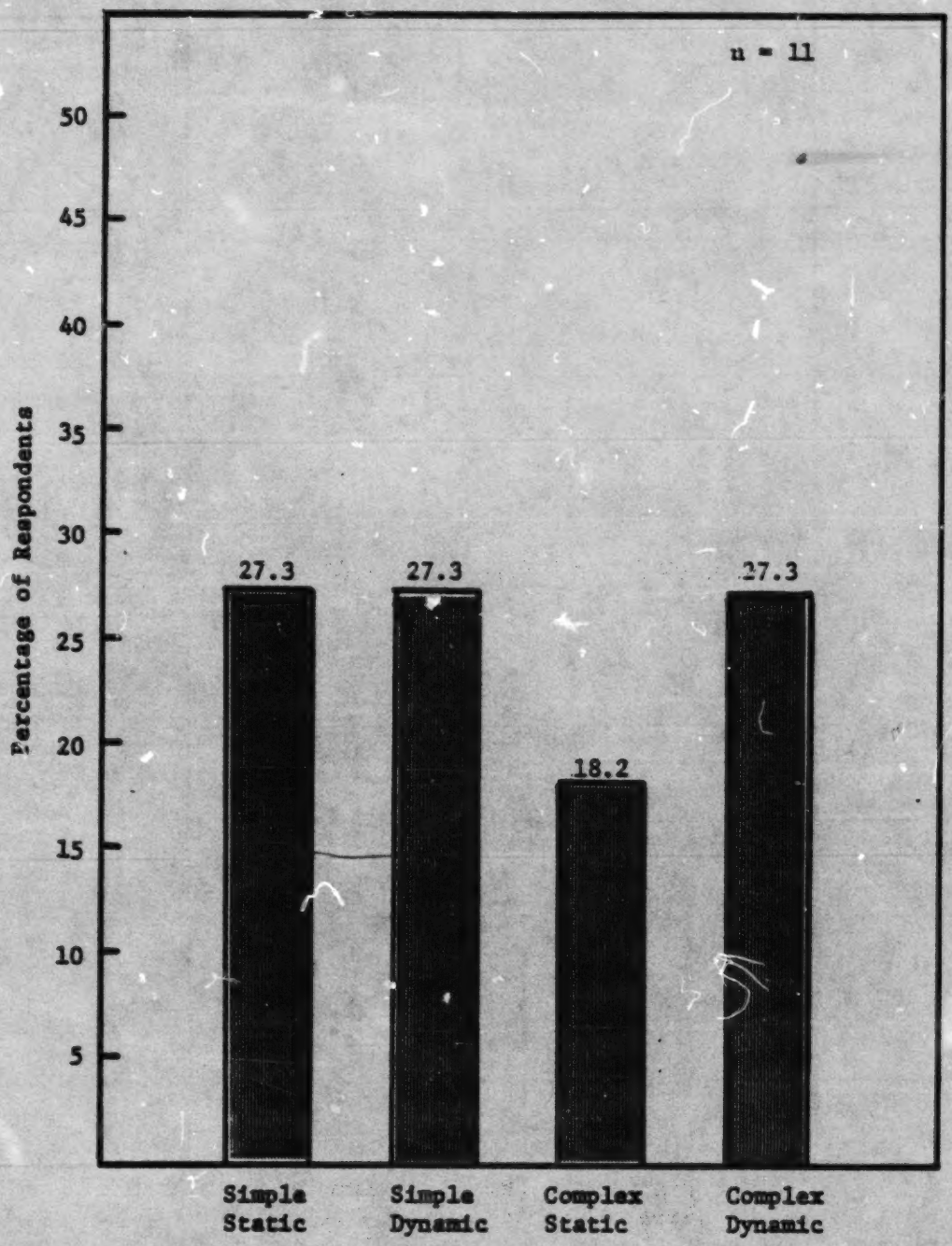
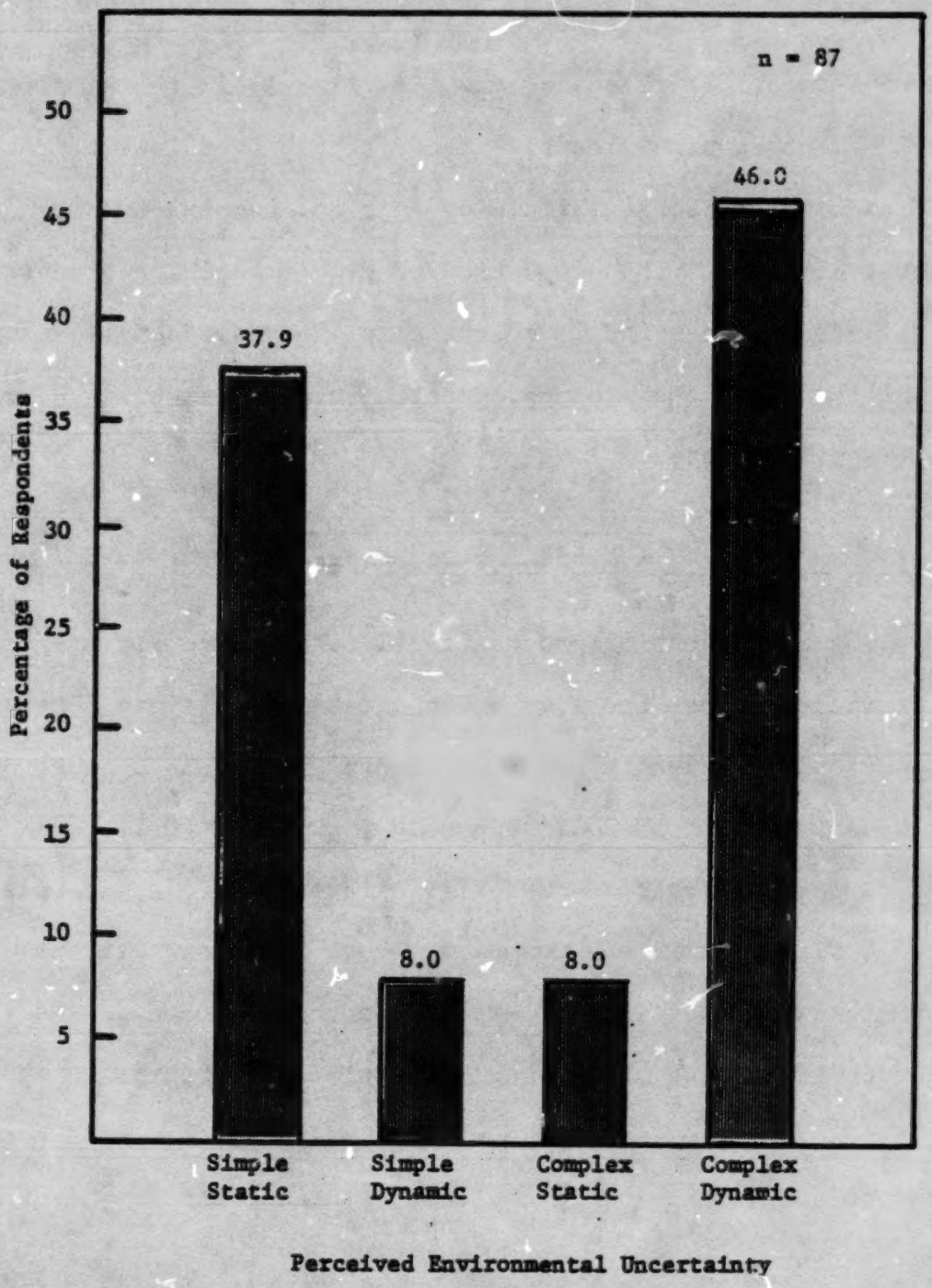


Figure 4. Distribution of Expert Prescriber Role in Four Perceived Environmental Uncertainty Conditions



FINDINGS

The chi-square test shows a systematic and significant relationship between perceived environmental uncertainty and the PR roles ($\chi^2 = 19.14$, 9df, $p < 0.05$). The proportion of technical services provider role enactors (See Fig. 1) in the simple-static environment is significantly higher than proportions of the role in the complex-static, simple-dynamic and complex-dynamic environments. Similarly, the proportion of problem-solving process facilitators (See Fig. 2) in the complex-dynamic environment is significantly higher than proportions of problem-solvers in the other environments.

Figures 1,2,3,4 about here

The communication process facilitators (See Fig. 3) are evenly distributed across the four environmental conditions. But an interpretation of what this means is almost impossible because of the extremely small number of such role incumbents (n=11).

Expert prescribers (See Fig. 4) predominate the simple-static and complex-dynamic environments. There is no significant difference between the proportions of experts in these two environments. Significant differences occur when proportions of experts in the simple-static and complex-dynamic environments each are tested against proportions of experts in the complex-static and simple-dynamic environments.

The distribution of roles in the four environments does not

radically change when controlled for rank of practitioner in the organization.

The analysis of variance shows that the uncertainty variables do not have main or interactional effects upon the dependent role variables, albeit with one exception. The static-dynamic dimension shows a significant main effect ($F = 6.41$, $p < 0.05$) on the technical services provider role enactment. A comparison of means for this role shows a monotonic and significant decrease from the simple condition ($\bar{X} = 4.92$) to the dynamic condition ($\bar{X} = 4.32$). This indicates that perceptions of change in the environment may lead to a decline in the enactment of the technician role. This analysis is not only consistent with environmental expectations of this role model, but is also supportive of Duncan's (1972) contention that the static-dynamic dimension is a more important contributor to perceptions of uncertainty than the simple-complex dimension.

DISCUSSION

Hypothesis I is supported in that more than half of the practitioners who perceive their environments to be simple and static also see themselves in the technical services provider role. Likewise, more than half the practitioners who perceive their environment to be complex and dynamic also see themselves in a problem-solving role. The other two hypotheses are not supported by the data.

Of interest is the expert role which, contrary to expectation,

occurs in the two extreme environmental conditions. An inkling of what may be happening comes from the Blake and Mouton (1976) summarization of prescriptive or expert interventions. It appears that prescriptive interventions may also occur in two sets of circumstances. One is when the other (client/boss) is at his wit's end and has thrown up his hands in despair. Such self-defeating behavior is likely to occur in conditions of extreme uncertainty as when the environment is perceived to be both complex and dynamic. Consequently, the other (client/boss) may turn to the practitioner for expert advice. A role has already been described as a job-related behavioral response to, among other things, others' expectations. Given the previous statements, it may be natural for the practitioner to associate expert behavior with extremely uncertain environment.

According to Blake and Mouton (1976), expert behavior may also be expected in situations beyond the technical capabilities of the client or boss. In such a circumstance, the practitioner's special skills are presumably deferred to.

Thus, we may in reality have two kinds of expert behavior, one a broad, all-encompassing, know-all behavior evoked in extremely uncertain conditions, and the other a narrow band of expertise that is routinely evoked as a function of the practitioner's job with the organization.

Despite encouraging results, it is evident that environmental

uncertainty, as it has been operationalized here, does not provide all the answers to practitioner behavior. It may be that the concept is far more complex, even different, with more dimensions than have been tapped in this study. It must be noted that the complexity and change dimensions have been adapted from organizational studies conducted on non-PR, primarily technical and marketing executives. While these dimensions may adequately describe a marketing manager's decision environment, they, atleast complexity, may be unimportant to a PR practitioner. Public relations functions in an opinion environment, and it may be that perception of threat -- depending on whether public opinion is perceived as hostile or beneficial -- is a critical dimension.

There may be other dimensions, untapping which may be a profitable direction for future research and an addition to current understanding of practitioner environment and behavior.

REFERENCES

Aiken, Michael and Jerald Hage (1968) "Organizational Interdependence and Intra-Organizational Structure". American Sociological Review 33 (December): 912-30.

Aldag, Ramon J. and Ronald G. Storey (1975) "Environmental Uncertainty: Comments on Perceptual and Objective Indices". Paper presented at the National Meeting of the Academy of Management, New Orleans.

Blake, Robert R. and Jane S. Mouton. Consultation. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co. (1976).

Broom, Glen M. and George D. Smith (1979) "Testing the Practitioner's Impact on Clients". Public Relations Review, Vol. V, No 3: 47-59.

Burns T. and G. Stalker. The Management of Innovation. Chicago: Quadrangle Books (1961).

REFERENCES (Contd.)

Cutlip, Scott M. and Allen H. Center. Effective Public Relations. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc. (1971).

Dill, William (1958) "Environment as an Influence on Managerial Autonomy". Administrative Science Quarterly, 2 (March): 409-43.

Downey, Kirk H. and John W. Slocum (1975) "Uncertainty Measures, Research and Sources of Variation". Academy of Management Journal, 18: 562-78.

Duncan, Robert B. (1972) "Characteristics of Organizational Environments and Perceived Environmental Uncertainty". Administrative Science Quarterly 17: 313-27.

Emerson, Richard (1962) "Power-Dependence Relations". American Sociological Review, 27 (February): 31-41.

Emery, F.E. and E. Trist (1965) "The Causal Texture of Organizational Environments". Human Relations, 18: 21-31.

Galbraith, Jay R. (1972) "Organization Design: An Information Processing View". In J.W. Lorsch and P.R.Lawrence (Eds), Organization Planning: Cases and Concepts. Homewood, Ill.: Irwin.

Garner, William. Uncertainty and Structure as Psychological Concepts. New York: John Wiley and Sons (1962).

Katz, Daniel and Robert L. Kahn. The Social Psychology of Organizations. New York: John Wiley and Sons (1978).

Kofka, K. Principles of Gestalt Psychology. New York: Harcourt & Brace (1935).

Lawrence, Paul R. and Jay W. Lorsch. Organization and Environment: Managing Differentiation and Integration. Boston: Division of Research, Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard U (1967).

Miles, Raymond E., Charles C. Snow and Jeffrey Pfeffer (1974) "Organization-Environment: Concepts and Issues". Industrial Relations, 13: 244-64.

Michael, D. Learning to Plan and Planning to Learn. San Francisco: Josey Bass (1975).

Newsom, Doug and Alan Scott. This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations. Belmont, Ca: Wadsworth Publishing Co. (1976).

Pugh, Derek, D.J. Hickson, C.R. Hinings and C. Turner (1969) "The Context of Organizational Structures". Administrative Science Quarterly 14: 91-114.

Rogers, Everett M. and Rekha Agrawala Rogers. Communication in Organizations. New York: The Free Press (1976).

Smith, George D. Public Relations Roles: An Empirical Study of Public Relations Consulting. Unpublished Master's thesis (1978).

REFERENCES (Contd.)

Schein, Edgar H. Process Consultation: Its Role in Organizational Development. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co. (1969).

Spiro, H.J. "Authority, Values and Policy" in C.J.Friedrich (Ed) Nomos I Authority. Boston: Harvard U Press (1958).

Terreberry, Shirley (1968) "The Evolution of Organizational Environments". Administrative Science Quarterly 12: 377-96.

Thompson, James D. Organization in Action. New York: McGraw-Hill (1967).

Weick, Karl E. The Social Psychology of Organizing. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley (1969).

Zaltman, G., R. Duncan and J. Holbeck. Innovations and Organizations. New York: John Wiley and Sons (1973).